



cartographies of diaspora

contesting identities

avtar brah

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Cartographies of Diaspora

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Avtar Brah teaches at Birkbeck College, University of London.

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Ek Onkar Sat Nam

*For my mother, Dhan K.Brah, and in the memory
of my father, Bachan S.Brah, and my nephew,
Harjinder (Bhola) Grewal*

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Introduction

SITUATED IDENTITIES/DIASPORIC TRANSCRIPTIONS

What does it mean to think about the politics of diaspora in the present historical moment? Reflecting on this question made me acutely aware how my whole life has been marked by diasporic inscriptions. I have had ‘homes’ in four of the five continents—Asia, Africa, America, and now Europe. When does a place of residence become ‘home’? This is something with which those for whom travel constitutes a form of migrancy are inevitably confronted at some stage in their lives. And, it is a question that is almost always enmeshed with politics, in the widest sense of the term.

I was born in the Panjab and I grew up in Uganda. This rather banal statement can also be ‘read’ as the historical entanglement of a multitude of biographies in the crucible of the British Empire. In this sense my own biography is also a reminder of the collective history of South Asians in what used to be known as ‘British East Africa’. This history is underpinned by a series of episodes: indentured labour recruited from India by the British during the nineteenth century to build the railways; the twentieth-century migration of those, such as my parents, who followed in the wake of the folklore that painted Africa as a land of opportunity; the formation in East Africa—via the effects of colonial policy—of the ‘colonial sandwich’, with Europeans at the top, Asians in the middle, and Africans at the bottom; the restructuring of these hierarchies in complex ways during the period following Uganda’s independence from colonial rule; the post-colonial political strife that resulted in the military coup which brought Idi Amin to power; the expulsion of Asians from Uganda by Amin; the devastation of civil war in Uganda; and, in the late 1990s, the emerging policy of

Uganda's current president Museveni to encourage Uganda Asians—scattered around the globe—to return to Uganda. Hence, the issue of home, belonging, and identity is one that is perennially contested for people like me. But, as will become clearer in the penultimate chapter, it is no longer a settled issue—if ever it was - even for those who consider themselves secure in their own sense of belonging.

Awareness of the political import of *proclaiming* identity came to me relatively early. During the last year of high school I applied for a scholarship to study in the USA. After a selection process that involved my first encounter with the Scholastic Aptitude Test, a supposed 'ability indicator', I was called for an interview. Candidates were interviewed by an all-male panel that included representatives from various universities in the USA.

'Do you see yourself as African or Indian?' asked an American member of the panel.

He had used the term 'Indian' in the general sense that it was often used in East Africa to refer to all people of South Asian descent. The sub-continent had, of course, long since been partitioned into India and Pakistan—a parting gift of the British Raj.

At first this question struck me as somewhat absurd. Could he not see that I was *both!* Uganda was my home. I held a Ugandan passport. This is where I had spent all but the first five years of my life. The hours spent as a child combing the shamba at Naviwumbi; monitoring with incredible patience every detail of the metamorphosis of a pond of tadpoles into frogs; playing in the warm rain that would begin to beat down in huge bursts, quite out of the blue, and dry up just as suddenly; the aroma of the red soil after the first rain drops, and the sheer pleasure of climbing trees to pick mangoes or jamuns; the gentle murmur of the Nile as it springs out of Lake Victoria; journeys through the lush green forest lining the road from Jinja (my home town) to Kampala; the trials and tribulations, as well as the joys, of adolescence... all this and much more was part of my very being. But I had memories, too, of early childhood in the Panjab—the dazzling yellow fields of mustard, playing hide-and-seek in sugar-cane fields, sitting on a charpoy in the evening listening to fairy tales or ghost stories told by a family elder. Memories too of friends and family, including two sisters, left behind in India when we came to Uganda. I remember the childhood pain of displacement during my first years in Africa, mediated by my identification with my mother's acute longing for her daughters and her 'home' in India.

‘I am a Ugandan of Indian descent,’ I had replied. He seemed satisfied by my answer.

But, of course, he could not *see* that I could be both. The body in front of him was already inscribed within the gendered social relations of the colonial sandwich. I could not just ‘be’. I had to *name an identity*, no matter that this naming rendered invisible all the other identities—of gender, caste, religion, linguistic group, generation.... The discourse of the interview was not concerned with these. Nor would my interlocutor have asked this question of someone who had ‘looked African’. But, dear Goddess, what is an ‘African look’ or an ‘Asian look’? Why could ‘my look’ not be a signifier of ‘African-ness’ in Uganda? After all, the white man from the USA was asking me about my identity and, surely, this could not be reduced to ‘looks’? Yet I know now and knew then that ‘looks’ mattered a great deal within the colonial regimes of power. Looks mattered because of the history of the racialisation of ‘looks’; they mattered because discourses about the body were crucial to the constitution of racisms. And racialised power operated in and through bodies. Moreover, racialised power configured into hierarchies, not simply between the dominant and subordinate categories of people, but also among them; that is, between the ‘Indian’ and the ‘African’ in this instance. In [Chapter Five](#), I argue that such operations of power constitute modes of *differential racialisation*. In East Africa, as I discuss in [Chapter One](#), such hierarchies were lubricated through the economic and political imperatives that shaped the colonial sandwich.

‘Why do you wish to study in America, so far from home?’ asked another white man?

Ah! So they *do* recognise that Uganda is my home, I thought to myself. But I knew, too, that the ‘referent’ of ‘home’ in the two questions was qualitatively different. The first question invokes ‘home’ in the form of a simultaneously floating and rooted signifier. It is an invocation of narratives of ‘*the nation*’. In racialised or nationalist discourses this signifier can become the basis of claims in the proverbial Powellian sense—that a group settled ‘in’ a place is not necessarily ‘of’ it. Idi Amin asserted that people of Asian descent could not be ‘of’ Uganda, irrespective of how long they had lived there. In Britain, racialised discourses of the ‘nation’ continue to construct people of African descent and Asian descent, as well as certain other groups, as being outside the nation. In the former Yugoslavia such constructions of ‘nation’ have been the driving force behind the genocide known as ‘ethnic cleansing’. In present day India, the religious Right represents Muslims as being outside the ‘nation’.

Implied in the second question, on the other hand, is an image of 'home' as the site of everyday lived experience. It is a discourse of locality, the place where feelings of rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice. Home here connotes our networks of family, kin, friends, colleagues and various other 'significant others'. It signifies the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a neighbourhood or a home town. That is, a community 'imagined' in most part through daily encounter. This 'home' is a place with which we remain intimate even in moments of intense alienation from it. It is a sense of 'feeling at home'.

'I want to go to America to get qualifications so I can come back and help my country', I had replied, with the youthful patriotic pride of the post-colonial generation.

We believed in the narratives of progress, dreaming that we could make things better. I had not yet learned the downside of patriotism.

There it was! The idealistic me basking in the warm glow of what I saw as love for 'my country'. It is perhaps due to the memory of such moments that I have never found it unduly puzzling why ordinary folk like you and me could, if we did not continually interrogate such politics, get drawn into the nationalist imagination. At some stage in our life most, if not all, of us have had some considerable psychic investment in the idea of belonging to 'a people'. This need not necessarily be a problem in itself. What is at issue is the way in which the construct 'my people' is constituted and mobilised in and through economic, political, and cultural practices. When does the attachment to a community and a place, the sociality of everyday life world, become 'my country right or wrong'? When does the specificity of historical experience of a collectivity become *essentialised into* racism and nationalism? And how does gender figure in these markers of 'difference'? I address these questions explicitly in the last three chapters.

'Also, [I wish to go to America] because higher education is not all that easy to get if you are a girl', I had added.

'So your family is not supportive?' the white male academic from one of the USA universities offered.

'Oh, no! They are supportive. Especially my father. But it is just everything else.'

Terms such as 'patriarchal social relations' were not part of my vocabulary then, but this is what I had meant by 'everything else'. I was already an avid reader of Nanak Singh, a Panjabi novelist, of Amrita Pritam, who writes in Panjabi and Hindi, and of Sahir

Ludhianvi, an Urdu poet, all of whom took issue with gender, caste, and class subordination. I was also fascinated by the feminist and anti-clerical perspective of the early eighteenth-century Panjabi Sufi poet Waris Shah, who used the romantic legend of ‘Heer Ranjha’ to articulate a powerful social critique. Such critique was also embedded in the writings of the Sikh Gurus, and I was strongly influenced by these. But I had found little of their vision in the practices of our local clerics, who often brushed aside my questions about such things with impatience and irritation. Needless to say, I became very uncomfortable with the formal institutions of organised religion. It is not a coincidence, therefore, that my desire to go ‘so far away from home’ was in part a flight from the restrictions of patriarchal relations as they obtained in Uganda at the time. But, of course, effects of social relations cannot be expunged that easily, for we carry their traces in our psyche. What is the relationship between *affect*, *psychic modalities*, *social relations*, and *politics*? This question underpins the whole of this text, but it is explicitly addressed in the last six chapters.

So it was that I went to California, and later to Wisconsin. To be an undergraduate at the University of California in the late sixties and early seventies was to be in the throes of USA student politics, although UC Davis, where I was enrolled, was a lukewarm version of the hotbed that UC Berkeley was. Nevertheless, it was not long before I was involved in demonstrations against the Vietnam war, the grape boycott organised by labour union activists led by Caesar Chavez, and anti-racist politics. The particular forms that such struggles assumed on campuses at this stage were many and varied. This was a period of the Civil Rights Movement, of Black Power, of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party... It was the heyday of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, of Flower Power, and the beginnings of ‘Second Wave Feminism’.

Among the students who were being called up to join the army, a growing number were beginning to refuse the call to fight in Vietnam. Some of these ‘draft dodgers’, as they were likely to be called by their detractors, burnt their call-up papers at mass public rallies where antiwar singers such as Joan Baez sang their protest songs. Women were beginning to place the issue of sexual politics firmly on the agenda. It was a time when the slogans of ‘Peace’ and ‘Love’ were heard alongside the vibrant language of militancy. While ‘hippies’ handed out flowers, members of the Black Panther Party were adopting militant tactics against police brutality and other forms of political repression. Organisations such as the Weathermen (which, in fact,

included women members) used methods of armed insurgency. I have a distinct memory of being woken up in the early hours of one morning in Madison, Wisconsin, by what seemed to be the first convulsions of an earthquake, and later finding out that one of the science departments on campus had been blown up by a group protesting against research which, in their view, was implicated in the growing might of the armaments industrial complex. There were rallies, demonstrations, marches, teach-ins, and love-ins. There was energy and optimism that the world could be changed for the better, even if many of us were incredibly naive about the inherent complexity and contradictions.

Much of what I learnt about inequality in the USA was not from university courses, which had little to say about the issues which the above social movements were throwing up, although a few individual professors did take up some of the concerns. I became very interested in understanding what the politics of figures such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, the Soledad Brothers and Caesar Chavez were highlighting about American society. A Nigerian friend studying in Georgia introduced me to the history of racism in the Southern states of the USA. Attending UC Berkeley one summer, he found California 'liberal' in comparison to the South. And there was a sense in which he was right, not least because Berkeley then did lend itself to being read as the centre of radical politics. Yet one only had to go to Oakland or San Francisco to see the poverty in which large sections of black Californians lived. Soon, state violence against Black Power activists in California was to match that perpetrated anywhere else in the USA, and it had not been such a long time ago that the Watts district in Los Angeles had witnessed a major uprising of the poor and dispossessed. The sacking of Angela Davis, a young black professor, from her teaching post at the University of California by California's then Governor Ronald Reagan and the Regents of the University, because of her membership of the Communist Party, served to bring the issue of class politics to the fore, although the 'language' of class was not such a central theme in the vocabulary of student politics.

I found the allure of Flower Power also deeply attractive. My fellow students were advocating 'dropping out of the materialist' system, shouting anti-war slogans to the strains of 'We shall overcome', the signatory song of the Civil Rights Movement. I was impressed by their critical, questioning practice. Yet most of these students came from quite affluent backgrounds. There were not many black American students at Davis. Indeed, there were relatively few American 'students of colour', to use present day US terminology. This category was

comprised mainly of we ‘foreign’ students, as we were then called. As I achieved greater familiarity with the issue of poverty in the inner cities of California, the question of ‘dropping out’ assumed a different meaning. The poor possessed little from which to ‘drop out’. The gentle calls for love and peace of the ‘flower children’ began to sound affected and Utopian—the growing-up pangs of a privileged post-war generation—although the idea of ‘non-violent’ forms of struggle continued to touch a deep chord in me. As a child I had grown up listening to anti-colonial songs from Indian movies of the post-war period. These songs could be heard on Ugandan radio years after the release of a particular movie. The history of the independence movement of India was not on the formal curriculum of our schools, nor indeed was the history of Uganda itself until after independence. Nevertheless, the power of oral history and the media meant that we got to know of the tactics of ‘non-violence’ used by Gandhi, and the militant strategies of figures such as Bhagat Singh. I had always been quite ambivalent about the relative merits of these strategies of political opposition. Now I was visited by the same ambivalence. I veered between the teachings of Martin Luther King, who, as I later found out, had been influenced by Gandhi, and the arguments against ‘turning the other cheek’ offered by followers of Malcolm X. It is a dilemma one still faces as one surveys the global conflicts of the 1990s.

My relationship to these political formations in the USA was inextricably entwined with my status as a ‘foreign’ student who ‘looked Indian’. I was not categorised as ‘Asian’, for this descriptor was then reserved largely for Chinese and Japanese Americans. The highly publicised visits of the pop-band, the Beatles, to India in search of spiritual awakening had made Indian classical music and transcendental meditation quite ‘chic’ in the USA. This might have been one reason why South Asians on USA campuses were constructed as ‘non-European others’, largely through technologies of exoticism, although of course the USA’s own historical relationship with global colonialism and imperialism could hardly be immaterial. As African students we were all constituted as non-Europeans, but students from Africa of South Asian descent were viewed differently from black Africans. The latter were, in turn, differentiated from black Americans. All this mattered. And not only to white Americans but equally to black Americans. Once, when I was in Wisconsin, black American students were planning a protest march. A group of us ‘foreign’ students approached them saying that we would like to march with them. We were told in no uncertain terms that this was their march, and we could

not join them, although we could show solidarity by marching separately. Here was an important lesson for us. *The politics of solidarity with another group is one thing, but the self-organising political mobilisation of the group itself is quite another.* I was to learn this lesson, from a different positionality, even more convincingly in Britain.

I came to Britain (or ‘Vilayat’, as Britain is often called by Panjabi or Urdu speakers in South Asia) for a short visit on my way back from the USA to Uganda, and was made a stateless refugee by Idi Amin’s expulsion of South Asians from Uganda. Britain has since been my country of ‘permanent abode’, to use the jargon of immigration law. I was one of the luckier ‘Ugandan Asians’, in that I was already in Britain at the time of Idi Amin’s edict. This meant that I escaped the experience of head-on racism which, as I discuss in [Chapter One](#), greeted this group of Ugandan refugees as they arrived in Britain.

Britain during the 1970s was in the throes of Left politics. There had been major demonstrations against the Industrial Bill and the 1971 Immigration Act. Edward Heath’s Conservative government was brought down by the striking miners. Margaret Thatcher, the then Minister of Education, was denounced by the Left in the slogan ‘Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher’, for abolishing free milk for children in schools. The Women’s Liberation Movement was getting under way and posing serious challenges to all manner of orthodoxies. The formation of cartels by the oil producing countries of the Middle East was beginning to give Western countries a taste of the same medicine that they had been administering for centuries to the ‘Third World’, and it was unleashing anti-Arab and Anti-Iranian racism in its wake. Some of the major industrial strikes of the period were mounted by Asian workers and were led by women: at Imperial Typewriters, at Grunwicks and at Chix. The diminutive figure of Jaya Ben Patel—erect, defiant, head held high—walking tall in front of a cordon of towering policemen remains one of the most striking icons of this ‘post-colonial’ moment in the heart of the metropolitan.

At the same time, young black people were mounting collective struggles against racism and police harassment in London, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham and Bradford, to name just some of the geographical locations. Campaigns against such inequities as the practice of ‘search under suspicion’—the use by the police of the nineteenth-century ‘SUS’ law, initially designed to target the white working class but now singling out young blacks; the Prevention of Terrorism Act, directed against Irish people; immigration legislation;

the prescribing of the drug Depo-Provera to working-class women, and especially black working-class women, as a means of differentially regulating sexualities; and many other practices of the state, as well as those within the realm of ‘civil society’, were constituting a variety of new political subjects. These politics were bringing together diverse groups of people in associative solidarity.

I began to look for my own political coordinates in the midst of this political flux. How was I to ‘place’ myself in Britain? Needless to say, this could not be a simple matter of fiat. Britain’s imperial history had already ‘situated’ me. Within weeks of being in London I had been called a ‘Paki’. I was so taken aback the first time I was called a racist name that I was struck silent. I now realised, in quite a different way from when I was expressing my solidarity with black Americans, what it felt like to be called a ‘nigger’. I was no longer a ‘foreign’ student, a visitor on a temporary sojourn. Rather, I was now constituted within the discourse of ‘Paki’ as a racialised insider/outsider, a post-colonial subject constructed and marked by everyday practices at the heart of the metropolis. The discourse of ‘Paki’ echoed colonial encounters. But it was not a narrative about the ‘natives out there’, as it had been during the British Raj, but rather it signified the inferiorised Other right here at the core of the fountain head of ‘Britishness’. I had arrived in Britain as a young adult—my sense of myself fairly secure. Yet I had been outraged, mortified and, most importantly, temporarily *silenced* by this racist onslaught. What might the impact of racism be upon young children? I had heard this question asked in the USA, but now my relationship to it had changed. All the children of the world implicated in this question had become part of my genealogy, and I was part of theirs. This is not to suggest that one cannot empathise with those whose experience one does not share. Nor that experience is a guarantor of some essential authenticity. But there is a qualitative difference when this changing fiction we call ‘I’ or ‘Me’ is directly *subjected* within specific discursive practices. This *experience* matters.

My use of the technologies of autobiographies in this introduction exposes the contradictions embodied in the production of identity. Throughout, I speak with the authority of ‘I’ and ‘Me’ as if ‘I’ am a pre-given ‘reality’, when the discussion shows how ‘I’ and ‘me’ have been changing all the time. On the other hand, my signature is possible precisely because there is a changing core that I recognise as me. I interrogate my own political biography also because it is so closely tied up with my intellectual labour. I do this especially as a means of highlighting the collective struggles that articulate the social movements